

Jake Skeets. *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers*. Milkweed Editions, 2019. 96 pp. ISBN: 9781571315205.

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The English epigraph to Jake Skeets' debut, National Poetry Series Award winning collection *Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers* reads: "From here, there will be beauty again." The first word of this sentence indicates movement as well as inheritance. The second indicates the present condition in a specific location—here. The following three words indicate a state of being at some point in the future, but serve less as a prediction than as an assertion, as if by stressing beauty (the sixth word, the thing itself, the subject of the sentence), Skeets might bring it into being. But he will only be able to do so by acknowledging everything that came before, which he makes clear with the final word—"again": a word which simultaneously points to both the past (i.e. there has been beauty before) and the future as conceived in the present. In literally rounding out the sentence (i.e. from here might begin the sentence *again*), this final word indicates the cyclical nature of time, and specifically, its regenerative function. It is therefore *not* the final word—there is no punctuating period to terminate the sentence—and the utterance thus curls backward (or forward) upon itself to repeat ad infinitum.

The book likewise moves in a circle, for Skeets pulls the epigraph from the collection's last poem—one of the "In the Fields" series—which in turn, lifts lines from D. A. Powell's "Boonies." Powell's poem ends with the lines "we all are beautiful at least once. / And, if you'd watch over me, we can be beautiful again." In the epigraph, Skeets edits Powell's words to emphasize place—the setting of the collection—which becomes a fully embodied presence throughout the course of the poems:

This place is White Cone, Greasewood, Sanders,
White Water, Bread Springs, Crystal, Chinle, Nazlini,
Indian Wells, where all muddy roads lead from Gallup.
The sky places an arm on the near hills. (4)

This place is "Drunktown" (1). This place is "*Indian Eden*" (1). This place is "split in two" (1). "Clocks ring out as train horns" (1), snippets of description crackle from the police radio—"Native American male. Early twenties. About 6'2", 190 pounds. / Has the evening for a face" (61)—and newspaper headlines in "The Indian Capital of the World" read:

man hit by train
man found dead possibly from exposure in a field
woman hit by semitruck attempting to cross freeway

In this case, the shape of the poem itself seems to move—in time—with the landscape which it describes and, even as human presences blend back into the environment through the course of the collection, so the environment itself becomes a human presence.

Skeets manages to make geological words like “monocline,” “diatreme,” and “laccolith” ring with a humanoid sexiness in the poem “Maar,” which spills over with the fecundity of the earth. Geological, biological, climatological, and cosmological elements sing a pulsing lovesong to one another where “buffaloburr veins around siltstone / mounds on the monocline” and “flow rock smooths over into oar / cutleaf cornflower overgrown,” where “bulb liquid overflows into grasses,” and “blue flax left as moans / that foam into the sky” (28).

Like the elements in “Maar” the poems throughout this collection speak back and forth to one another. When the speaker in “Buffalograss” siphon[s] doubt,” from his lover’s throat, he recalls not only “his cousin trying to show him how to siphon” in “Siphoning” (25), but also the “Gasoline Ceremony” of the “boy’s first time watching porn. His mouth turned exhaust pipe” (26), and his “Virginity,” which he loses with “Clouds in his throat” (27). The reader recalls that “*Drunk is the punch. Town a gasp*” (1) and that the two boys at the “Afterparty” hunker into one another and “tank down beer” (7). The act of sucking air recalls all of the teeth in the poems, the open mouths, the whispers, the breaths sucked away. It highlights the constant metanarration about poetry itself and the concern Skeets has with the way things are said. The two “In the Fields” poems and “Comma” come to mind, but especially “Red Running into Water,” in which Skeets breaks down the pronunciation of specific Navajo diacriticals by using violently dynamic images that recall the poem “Naked” in which Skeets likewise uses Diné Bizaad. This is the language with which he also begins and ends the collection, the final salutation repeated four times—stacked one on top of the other—recalling “the creation story where Navajo people journeyed four worlds” (24). But even this story refuses the mythic label so often lobbed at Native America, and opts instead for a narrative of multiplicity and humor. “Some Navajo people say there are actually / five worlds,” Skeets writes, “Some say six” (24). The people disagree through dialogue in the present tense and pull the past along with them. Every “retelling”—every repetition—is a little bit different in this lovesong.

Images repeat themselves as well within the book, which is full of bottles, bones, and beetles. Full of boys trying to find their way among “the truck and the char and everything else” (16), boys who might “unlearn... how to hold a fist” by holding a hand

(76), boys who might learn “to be a man by loving one” (36). These poems, and the boys and men within these poems, must—of necessity—speak back and forth to one another because of the ever-present violence that threatens to split them all apart.

Settler colonialism makes myriad inroads within Skeet’s collection where the landscape’s economic exploitation mirrors the generational poverty, violence, and alcoholism that *plague* the Heart of Indian Country. In the first section of “Let There Be Coal,” “The boys load the coal. Inside them, a generator station opens its eye. A father sips coal slurry from a Styrofoam cup” (21). In the third “In the Fields” poem, “Pipelines entrench” behind a lover’s teeth, and the speaker hears “a crack in his lung like burning coal” (46). In “Truck Effigy,” a man “swallows transmission and gasket,” and “an eye alters into alternator” (13). In “Comma,” a toddler sleeps, “fetaled in big snow / beneath I-40” (48), and in “American Bar,” the speaker proclaims “this town will kill you,” its “steel talons thread[ing] raw wool into sidewalks” (69). In making the environmental degradation of the colonized space explicit, Skeets explains how

train
tracks
and
mines
split
gallup
in two (22)

Then he adds an aural image to the mix of the visuals of concrete, coal, and steel. After the speaker in “Glory” sees a young boy get hit by a train, the phrasing mimics the wheels on the rails, first in “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t/ know. I don’t know,” and again when “it sounds like a river,” “ariverariverariverariverariverariverariver” (62). These onomatopoeic phrases echo the “rail spike teeth” which “tsk tsk tsked” in the title poem, the train tracks telling the listening boy that they “would catch him if he would just only just only just only just only / jump” (60). Readers can hear settler colonialism chugging into this place upon the myth of progress, upon the empty promises of forever-expansion, upon capitalist industry hammered into the earth.

These fragmentary scenes lead us to reflect on the fact that Gallup, New Mexico is named after a railroad paymaster. The town reeks of colonization and is perhaps best known to white Americans as a setting for Hollywood Westerns, a stop on Route 66, or perhaps as the famous locale of the celebrity-frequented El Rancho Motel. Skeets alludes to all of these conceptions of this place as “white space” which mauls remains like dogs (11) or else provides a place for scavengers like crows and letters to do the

same (58). It is “white space” on which the poetic persona arranges his “father’s boarding school soap bones” in order to call the arrangement “a poem,” and “white space” on which the face of the persona’s uncle “becomes a mirror,” until a

train horn

punch shatters

the mirror

frees him from the page

my uncle leaps from the (56)

Here, the stanza breaks off mid-thought, and the facing page—a blank page—thus becomes the white space from which the uncle has left, or rather, *is leaping*. He exists in the present tense, moving beyond the “white screen,” “before” which he stands (52). Skeets’s use of the word “before” resonates in this instance with multiple meanings. The speaker sees his uncle *before* (prior to) seeing the white space which frames him; his uncle stands in the landscape *before* it becomes (prior to it becoming) a colonized white space; his uncle stands *before* (in front of) the white screen which erases the landscape—the context—in which he and the speaker have both existed and in which they both continue to exist.

These lines appear in the poem “Drift(er),” which comes “*after* Benson James, Drifter Route 66, Gallup, New Mexico, 06/30/79 by *Richard Avedon*,” the photograph which Skeets uses as the cover image of his collection. The photograph itself brings to mind the pages in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* in which the repeated and ever-increasingly smudged phrases “I do not always feel colored” and “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” face one another across the spine of the book (Rankine 52-3). The utterances, which look as if they are stenciled onto brick, seem to reference *Citizen*’s own cover image, a photograph of David Hammons’s art pice, *In the Hood* (1993), which is comprised of a hood ripped from a hoodie and mounted on a white wall. But even this photograph includes a shadow which Avedon’s photograph of Skeets’s uncle does not. The observer of Avedon’s photograph, therefore, does not know from which direction the light comes. This throws into question the time of day, the time of year, and every other marker of setting, the photographer effectively erasing everything but the singular subject, and thus setting the subject adrift in a sea of whiteness.

Skeets argues through his poetry that this subject—his uncle, Benson James, the “man with shoulder-length hair / dollar bills fisted”—cannot be caught in a camera’s eye,

cannot be fixed in a space made up of erasure. The man moves beyond the framing device—a white sheet of paper taped to the side of a building—and beyond the lens (and the photographer behind the lens) that attempts to fix the man there:

See his lips how still
 how horizon
 how sunset [...] (52)

The man's face encompasses—and is encompassed, in turn, by—the landscape. Skeets frees him from the blank white space by placing him in context. To be liberated from "white space" means to return to the landscape. This book is a re-membering of the past—a past within the whole frame, the landscape writ large and all-inclusive. As Skeets has written of his book in "Drifting: A Cover Image Story": "I want to add what was made invisible. I want to bring the light back so we can have our shadows again. To give us back the morning so we can have the night."

The word "still" (qtd. above) crops up repeatedly throughout the collection, but it always refers to survival through an ever-changing present—a living continuity that is never stagnating, never immobile. These poems are not nostalgic. They vibrate with queer desire, the words coupling together in the landscape to make context for movement among them. Read "beardtongue," "pronghorn," "pigweed," "ricegrass," "snakeweed" (20), "Eyeteeth," "snowmelt," "tumbleweed" (76). Before "railroad" (45), "pipeline" (46), "sledgehammer" (21), "Drunktown" (1), is "larksupr and beeplant on the meadow" (28), is "sandbur" (30), "thunderhead" (31), "horseweed" (6), "horsetail" and "buffalograss" (39), is "the letter t vibrating in cottonwoods" (39). The reader can hear the "heartbeat" of the speaker like a "brushfire" (17) as it burns through this landscape of doublewords, a landscape which is always in a state of becoming. All of history piles into the present, and the speaker points out that it is "such a terrible beauty to find ourselves beneath things/ such a terrible beauty to witness men ripen" (68). Of course the word "ripen" implies the idea of cyclical time and the seasons, and Skeets complicates the idea of backsliding in such a schema by repeating Powell's "*We could be boys together,*" but adding the word "finally" (76). He suggests that to "unyoke," to "undress," to "unlearn" might provide a template for moving forward (76).

Skeets has been watching over the world from which he comes and is remaking it in the image of those who came before him, thus remaking it in his own image and in the images of those that will come after. The form of this book does not match its function; the form *is* its function. It does what it says will be done—the past, the present, and the future couple into doublewords and blend, couple and blend. The landscape and the people of the landscape—the people *from* the landscape—couple and blend, couple

and blend. The book becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy: it makes beauty again, from here

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